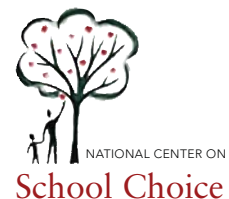


RESEARCH BRIEF

Taking Charge of Choice: How Charter School Policy Contexts Matter



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Against the backdrop of urban school politics, in which mayors play increasingly powerful and pivotal roles, the current study examines the origins and implications of mayoral control of charter school authorization and accountability in Indianapolis (see Henig & Rich, 2004; Wong & Shen, 2007). In contrast to analyses of mayoral takeovers of urban elementary education in cities such as Philadelphia, Chicago, and Baltimore, the study focuses on the advocacy coalitions and policy streams that made Indianapolis the first—and only—city with independent mayoral control over charter school authorization and accountability (see Bulkley, 2007; Kingdon, 1995; Orr, 1999; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999; Shipp, 2006).

The central research question of the study is: How (and why) did the policy landscape change to secure passage of the Indiana charter school law? To address this question, the author conducted more than 30 in-depth interviews with key stakeholders (e.g., charter and non-charter school leaders, school board members, business leaders, teachers union representatives, education foundation officers, former mayors of Indianapolis, and state legislators) involved in Indiana charter school law adoption and implementation. In addition, myriad documents were analyzed for descriptive evidence of the nature of governing coalitions and their members' educational and political values related to charter school policy.

KEY FINDINGS:

- The capacity to change the direction of education policy in Indianapolis was constituted by a public demonstration of collective action, trust among different institutions, and investment from partners external to the formal governance structures in the city.
- Civic capacity in Indianapolis coalesced measurably following charter school policy implementation and the establishment of the Mayor's Office of Charter Schools.

Background

According to Kingdon's (1995) model of the policymaking process, policy changes emerge when three streams—problem definition, policy response, and political process—come together to create a "window of opportunity." Changes in local and state leadership, a fiscal crisis, a massive program failure, or creeping incrementalism may help trigger an opportunity. The tipping point—whether or not an opportunity translates into policy change—requires political leadership or a policy entrepreneur. The policy entrepreneur manages the policy network by anchoring the new agenda to a well-defined set of problems and solutions.

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A Unique Policy Context

In 2001, Indiana became the 38th state to pass a charter school law, ending seven years of debate among state policymakers. Just five years later, charter schools numbered 36 in the state, with a total enrollment of 10,000 students, including almost 5,000 in Indianapolis alone. The rapid growth of Indiana's charter schools and the debate that preceded passage of the law are commonplace features in the political landscape of school choice in the United States.

The distinguishing feature in Indiana—the one-of-a-kind element in this charter school law—relates to the set of eligible chartering authorities. The law stipulates only three in the state: local school boards, public state universities, and the mayor of Indianapolis. From the passage of the law in 2001 until his unexpected defeat following a second term, Mayor Bart Peterson of Indianapolis opened 16 charter schools and closed one financially troubled one. The current Indianapolis mayor, Greg Ballard, has authorized two charter schools since taking office in 2008. Indianapolis remains the only city with independent mayoral control over charter school authorization and accountability.

In Indianapolis, the education and economic “problems” were easily identifiable, although the “solutions” remained highly contested across political contexts and policy communities. Indianapolis is the state’s capital and its largest city, with a population of more than 800,000. As such, it amplified some of Indiana’s most critical economic conditions—declining economic activity and vitality marked by a steady outflow of corporate interests from the city to the suburban communities, coupled with plant closings and a steady decline in manufacturing. These economic issues were matched by a set of negative education indicators: one of the lowest high school graduation rates in the nation (39%) in the Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) and a large and persistent achievement gap between white and African-American students in the district (Greene, 2003). Excessive rules and regulations and lack of accountability exacerbated these problems within public education. These conditions fueled a precipitous population decline in the city (and school district) of Indianapolis that began in the late 1980s.

The Streams Converge: Problems, Policies, and Politics

Republican State Senator Teresa Lubbers played an instrumental role in bringing about policy changes designed to address the state’s educational problems. Widely regarded as the founder of the movement for public school choice in Indiana, Lubbers worked for several years to cultivate a policy network that included other elected Republicans in the Senate and House, the Indiana and Indianapolis Chambers of Commerce, and local foundations and think tanks. She held legislative hearings on the problems of low graduation rates, large and persistent achievement gaps, and the lack of public confidence in IPS. She defined the problems and outlined the solutions in committee hearings, public speeches, and meetings with members of the growing school choice policy network in Indianapolis.

Lubbers concluded that charter schools were the solution to the educational problems of Indianapolis and the state. She observed that the appeal of charter schools is that they combine freedom with accountability. Freed from many of the rules and regulations that traditional public schools are required to follow, charter schools are able to introduce innovations that have the potential to improve student learning. In exchange for this freedom, the schools are held accountable for improving student outcomes.

In the late 1990s, Lubbers connected with well-organized forces within the Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce, national organizations, and leading advocates in the expanding charter school movement. The policy network was fully formed when state Sen. Earline Rogers, a Democrat from the economically hard-hit and educationally low-performing city of Gary, joined Lubbers in supporting the charter school effort. Rogers was instrumental in moving some Democratic legislators from stiff opposition to all expanded forms of school choice to what emerged as “middle ground” on the school choice policy agenda—charter schools.

Charter schools gained another advocate in 1999, when Bart Peterson, a Democrat, was elected mayor of Indianapolis. Peterson vowed to work with state legislative leaders to get a strong charter school law passed during the 2001 legislative session. He coupled his strong support for charter schools with a specific endorsement for an expanded mayoral role in public education as a charter school authorizer. In explaining his support for independent mayoral control of charter school authorization, Peterson noted that, “You are less likely to get the kind of charter community that you are looking for if you only leave it to school districts to do the chartering. So who the authorizers are is key.”

The match between policy problems (low graduation rates, lack of accountability, population decline in the city) and solutions (innovation and accountability through charter schools) culminated in a final negotiation with the teachers union in Indiana. In exchange for restored collective bargaining rights for Indianapolis district teachers and other provisions designed to provide a “level playing field” for charter schools and traditional public schools, House Democrats joined the Republican-led coalition in the state Senate and passed the Indiana charter school law in 2001.

The Mayor’s Office of Charter Schools

Granted legislative authority to authorize charter schools in IPS and the surrounding 10 school districts within the city limits of Indianapolis, Mayor Peterson and his chief aide set out to establish a system that was characterized by scrutiny, technical assistance, ongoing evaluation, and transparency. The Mayor’s Office of Charter Schools collected information from leading scholars, consulted with charter school authorizing experts

across the United States, and examined “best practices” across an array of urban school districts. The mayor created the Mayor’s Charter Schools Advisory Board and named prominent local educators, business leaders, and university scholars to serve. The advisory board added credibility, expertise, and transparency to the process. The mayor’s charter school program also attracted the support of prominent foundations such as Lilly Endowment, Inc. and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. By 2008, the Mayor’s Office of Charter Schools had become a kind of incubator for new civic capacity,¹ culminating in the creation of The Mind Trust, a nonprofit organization designed to establish broad-based education reforms across the city.

Policy and Research Implications

The study findings suggest that the political streams (Kingdon, 1995) associated with the original charter school law created new policy communities comprising state legislators, local business leaders, prominent national education foundations, and a key nonprofit education organization in Indianapolis. The civic capacity to implement innovative education reforms—the centerpiece of these new policy communities—can be viewed as a result of the rigor, transparency, and accountability associated with the mayor’s nationally acclaimed charter school authorizing program.

Many problems still remain, however. Despite the success of many of the mayor’s authorized charter schools—and the establishment of a parallel policy community consisting of IPS leadership, local universities, and the KIPP Charter Management Organization that solidified around a series of IPS magnet school programs and partnerships—the high school graduation rate in IPS remains among the lowest in the country, hovering around 35%. Moreover, the population decline in Indianapolis persists, with a precipitous drop in enrollment among middle-class families in IPS, in particular.

At the same time, there are new questions and external pressures regarding the sustainability of the political and policy streams that secured the adoption and implementation of the charter school program in Indianapolis. These are manifest in new pressures from Democrats and enduring fiscal pressures due

to the economic downturn and high unemployment across the state. In the end, enduring challenges remain regarding the efficacy of charter school policy as a potential lever for broad-based education reform and improved academic outcomes for Indianapolis and other urban school districts.

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- This brief summarizes a paper that was prepared for the National Center on School Choice Conference held in October 2009.

¹ According to Stone, Henig, Jones, and Pierannunzi (2001), civic capacity involves linking integral structures and processes across disparate entities—formal (public, governmental, institutional) and informal (private, interpersonal) relationships among key stakeholders, common understandings and trust, and an interest in engaging in collective action for a set of shared, mediated goals. This scaffolding supports the framework for moving forward with decisive and collective action toward solving public problems.

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